

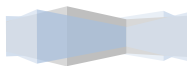
Women from Another World: Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska, Two of Edith Wharton's Heroines

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I

Two outstanding female characters can be found in the novels of Edith Wharton (1862-1937): Lily Bart in *The House Of Mirth* (1905) and Ellen Olenska in *The Age Of Innocence* (1920). As heroines springing from the same pen they could not be furthest from each other, despite their seemingly common fictional presentation as victims of their social environment. In addition to that, if the term heroine is to be taken at its face value—in its classical definition, involving noble deeds and admirable qualities—I would argue that Ellen Olenska is portrayed by Wharton as a truly heroic woman, while Lily Bart's behaviour classes her as a sham heroine. In the fifteen years mediating between Lily's fictional birth and the publication of *Ellen Olenska's* misadventures in New York Wharton discarded the model of feminine heroine that the former epitomizes to favour the model of female heroine that the latter represents.

To free themselves from the yoke of male-centred fictional strategies and modes, women writers must go beyond simply building their works around a central female character and, obviously, beyond offering a female response to male versions of the romance or the quest plots. Liberation comes with the free choice of plot, style and, above all, of heroine and hero, against the expectations of a male-dominated literary establishment and, an even more essential matter, against the conventions of more conservative women writers and readers. Although Edith Wharton was a conservative person, deeply attached to the values of her social background, despite the intensity with which she fought her way out of her intellectually stiffening American social set, as an artist she made a radical move towards freedom with *The House of Mirth*, precisely through the treatment of Lily Bart as its heroine.



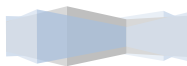
Wharton's growth into full maturity as a writer did not originate in the choice and defence of Lily Bart as the victimized protagonist in a male-dominated universe, done from the point of view of an equally victimized female writer, but with Lily's death. The overdose of chloral that accidentally kills Lily Bart, served the purpose of freeing Edith Wharton from the model of male-centred heroine (the feminine heroine who is utterly dependant on a man and helpless without his belief in her) to found her work on the model of a self-centred heroine: the heroine who struggles to become independent, even at the cost of her emotional happiness. Ellen Olenska was Wharton's truly free choice, the heroine she wanted to speak about but dared not until she became free to manipulate the memories of her childhood world for artistic purposes as she wished, in the safe distance of the years and from the perspective of a wholly renewed, post First World War Europe in which she herself lived as an independent, divorced woman writer, no longer bound by the suffocating customs of her American social group.

As a woman writer, Wharton was engaged in the renewal of fiction written by women in the turn-of-the-century United States, a loose movement contemporary to the appearance of budding forms of feminism, acting for the first time as a perceptible influence on social relations. In principle, Edith Wharton seems intent on combining in her novels both the female and the male tradition in a new, strong, androgynous voice that had its closest male counterpart in her friend Henry James'. Nevertheless, she shares fictional interests with other female writers of the time, such as Kate Chopin. Both women innovated female fiction by carrying the heroine beyond the difficult age defining the boundaries of marriageability. As Elaine Showalter maintains:

Like Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin's heroine in *The Awakening* (1899), who celebrates her twenty-ninth birthday by taking a lover, Lily Bart belongs to a genre we might call "the novel of the woman of thirty", a genre that emerged appropriately enough in American women's literature at the turn of the century.¹

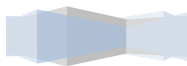
Nonetheless, it is easy to see that Edna Pontellier has many more points of contact with Ellen Olenska than with Lily Bart for the simple reason that in *The House of Mirth*

1 Elaine Showalter. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*" in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views: Edith Wharton* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 139.



Wharton deals with the more traditional question of Lily Bart's search for a proper husband, while in *The Age of Innocence* she is actually offering a triumphant response to the question posed by Kate Chopin, namely, which path would lead the married heroine to freedom out of her deeply unsatisfactory marriage. Both Wharton and Chopin want to take their heroines beyond the marriage ending to explore the unhappiness of marriage based on social conventions rather than in personal affinities. They agree in their novels on the idea that personal sacrifice—abandoning the loved man in Ellen's case or abandoning one's body to death in Edna's story—is no sacrifice at all if the action will result in the woman's liberation from her imprisonment in an unhappy marriage. As a matter of fact, Wharton even manages to make Ellen Olenska a modern woman anticipating Edna almost three decades with her much more independent behaviour, for she places the action of *The Age of Innocence* in the 1870s, twenty years before Edna enacts her drama of self-assertion. Of course, disregarding inner chronology, the truth is that Edna Pontellier is the first female heroine appearing in American fiction and that Kate Chopin is the first female writer groping in the dark in the search for a more satisfactory representation of women in fiction, far from the stereotyped heroines of most 19th century fiction.

Lily Bart, on the contrary, is the epitome of the woman who cannot reach a compromise with herself, not even to guarantee her own survival. Lily's alleged suicidal rebelliousness cannot compete in challenging the readers' notions of radical revolt with Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie* (1900), Lily Bart's close fictional contemporary. Dreiser did thoroughly destroy the idea of a feminine heroine like Lily by foregrounding this morally unburdened heroine who was ready to take Lily's place in the preferences of the fictional society of the newly rich and in those of the widening circle of the less educated readers, the mass of people on which American democracy was based. Dreiser, himself the son of an immigrant and a self-educated man, was the perfect representative of the new breed of writers that were questioning the values and privileges of Edith Wharton's traditional upper classes. Nonetheless, Wharton was not at a disadvantage in front of men like Dreiser for she was better equipped than him in terms of social knowledge and in terms of the artistic mastery of English, hers always much above his abilities. Wharton was equally



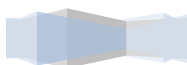
interested in criticizing the flaws of the American upper classes, but, she was, however, impaired in the sense that she had a narrower social scope to work upon in her novels and also because she was bound as a woman writer from a high-class background by the very same upper-class social code she wanted to criticize.

Lily Bart has been championed by innumerable critics as a pitiful victim of a failed moral revolt staged in revulsion against the misogynistic society of turn-of-the-century America. Heroines who commit suicide are likely to attract sympathy since death in fiction may be easily subject to sentimentalizing, though often their pathetic end mercifully obscures their less likeable personalities. Lily Bart's death strongly reminds of the death of another dissatisfied, debt-ridden heroine: Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. The main difference between these two failed women is that Madame Bovary actually becomes a 'corrupted' woman by carrying out a string of adulterous love affairs while Lily remains a virgin in spite of the gross gossip about her. This point offers an interesting clue about Wharton's dilemma as a woman writer. As a man Flaubert was free to delve into the erotic ramblings of his heroine, a territory forbidden to a lady novelist like Wharton, who resorted to describing the power of gossip to destroy women's reputation and lives rather than intrude into uncharted territory in women's fiction, that is to say, the territory dealing with women's own sexual behaviour. Showalter thinks that Edith Wharton used Lily to dramatize this problem and denounce her own constrictions:

I would argue, however, that Wharton refuses to sentimentalize Lily's position but rather, through associating with it her own limitations as the Perfect Lady Novelist, makes us aware of the cramped possibilities of the lady whose creative roles are defined and controlled by men. Lily's plight has a parallel in Wharton's career as the elegant scribe of upper-class New York society, the novelist of manners and decor.²

I would go a step farther and suggest that Wharton was not only protesting against her position as a woman writer tutored by men's views but also against women like Lily Bart who were thriving in high society, living an easy life of luxury, while other women, like Wharton herself, suffered countless hindrances to develop their professional

2 Showalter, in Bloom p. 142.

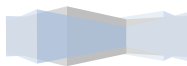


careers. Women like Lily Bart, who crave for admiration and despise men who are not rich enough to ease their already too pampered life, women who love jewels above poems, women who do not think of husbands as lovable men but as people under the obligation to pay for their caprices. Just like Madame Bovary, Lily Bart is a heroine few women may like; she has not got a single positive quality that any other woman may defend—she's indeed a “terrifying product” like May Welland in *Age of Innocence*, the kind of woman against whom the waves of feminism crash without any perceptible effect, the sort of woman still prevailing in the upper-classes today, comfortable in her conservatism, her puritanism and her role as traditional mother and wife.

Lily Bart is indeed a victim of civilization but also of Wharton's, who understood that Lily's sacrifice was necessary if her own fiction was to progress at all. Ellen Olenska is the triumph of Wharton's maturity as a writer, not only as a female writer but as an almost perfectly androgynous writer. Unlike Lily, Ellen manages to outwit the moral scrupulosity of American society by forsaking romance—the feminine domain of “good marriages”, like that of Newland Archer and May Welland—without sacrificing her independence, and refusing to go back to her husband. Likewise, Edith Wharton developed a successful literary career not only against the conventions of her social group but also against those of feminine fiction. Ellen Olenska and not Lily Bart is the true heroine of female fiction.

II

Many comments have been made about Lawrence Selden's inability to rescue Lily Bart from the clutches of poverty and early death—a point of view that defends in the last instance the function of man as a knight of romance and of woman as a damsel in distress in fiction dealing with love. A mild joke may be found at the beginning of the book about Lily's deliverance being Selden's task in life—and indeed I would argue that Selden pitifully sees himself apt for the role while Wharton condemns him to a life of endless bachelorhood to underline his short-comings as such a rescuer. Following the application of the fairy-tale plot to *The House of Mirth*, I would add that Lily plays the part of a very discriminating princess who, as a rule, will not surrender herself to her rescuer unless his money bag is well filled. She's, in any case, closer to the Sleeping



Beauty than to Cinderella; in a way, Lily becomes through her death a never awakened Sleeping Beauty.

When the novel opens Lawrence Selden is found enjoying the spectacle of Lily's calculating femininity, a highly interesting, charming performance due to her ingenuity but hardly commending of her moral values. Selden is repeatedly attracted by Lily's professed openness towards him only to be immediately rejected by her own will—at Bellomont, after the tableaux—or repelled by her unnerving inability to feel any authentic feeling or to follow any sensible course of action. Not that Lily is unaware of his attitude and her failure to understand him, at least this is her conclusion by the end of the book:

“Once—twice—you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake—I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late: you had judged me—I understood. It was too late for happiness—but not to be helped by the thought of what I had missed. That is all I have lived on—don't take it from me now! Even in my worst moments it has been like a little light in the darkness. Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me.”³

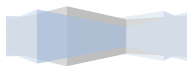
Through Lawrence Selden, Wharton is negatively commenting on the kind of dummy hero of romance, a flawless, impeccable, ultra-masculine man whom the heroine believes will sweep her off her dull daily life. Wharton's halting, hesitating, emotionally skeptical, wary hero, who desperately clings to his republic of the spirit to bear his loneliness, is far from being the imperturbable hero of romance. Selden is not charmed by the physical and moral waste endured by the heroine in search of her millionaire prince; on the contrary, he's appalled by her self-debasement. He doesn't hide his admiration for Lily as an amazing product of the age since, after all, she is an object of aesthetic pleasure to him as a man, but for all her refinement and expensive outlook, Selden is not dazed by Lily nor is he ignorant of her true condition. As he is reported to think: “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (7). All the same, Selden does not foresee that Lily is going to be crushed in her battle for survival; he actually regrets the fact that she has not been even given the

3 Edith Wharton. *The House Of Mirth*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 308.

chance to develop a fighting soul nor to stand on her feet. On the other hand, Lily's bracelets may remind Selden of handcuffs, but to her the world would be a luminous place if only she could always wear diamond bracelets and indulge herself in the state of happy slavery marriage implies, the bliss of which has been imposed on her as her only end in life by her own mother.

Despite his determined view of Lily as a calculating woman Selden respects her, possibly because he understands he is not short-listed as a marrying candidate by Lily, unless his respect is based on his hope for a miraculous reversal of matters in which Lily's occasional spontaneity will carry the best of the day—a feeling very similar to Gerty Farish's unwavering belief in Lily. Lily's spontaneity satisfies Selden when she accepts his hospitality or when she proposes the afternoon stroll at Bellomont, but he is disarmed as any man would be in both occasions by Lily's manipulative view of Gryce as her prey, a word actually used by Wharton to describe Lily's stance towards this man. Lily's attitude towards Selden is even slightly masochistic, for she's not afraid of letting him into the secret of her manoeuvres to entice Gryce into marriage when she perfectly knows she's acting wrongly, as it can be seen in the Americana episode. Lily is drawn towards Selden in the hope of being told the truth about herself, of having an external reference point, even though she knows Selden is too civilized to criticize her while they stick to their decorous roles as a lady and a gentleman: "Don't you see (...) that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and that what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them?" (9). Again and again she's annoyed by his presence because his integrity exposes her double-dealing.

Lily is struck by Lawrence's suggestion to imitate Gerty's independent life—which is, after all, a sensible enough idea—since she feels entitled to a life of luxury, of all reasons, because she is beautiful and has been made to believe that the proper environment for her is luxury. She claims to feel envy of Selden's masculine shabby independence, but the truth is that she's disgusted by the idea of herself as an independent single woman. What Lily shamelessly wants is a wealthy suitor. Inexplicably, several marriage projects involving an Italian prince, an English lord and an American young man rescued by his mother just in the nick of time, have languished. Rachel Blau DuPlessis understands that "Lily will never marry because she



can't decide among the forms of prostitution and their various grades, from respectable to sordid, yet she cannot renounce the life altogether."⁴, though this insightful observation doesn't disclose why Lily would lose her chances to marry and become a spinster like Gerty if she started living on her own. After all, there is no indication in the novel about Gerty not being a respectable, marriageable girl, except for the fact that she's repeatedly described as a physically uninteresting person.

The actual reason why Lily doesn't marry is that she can't reconcile herself to the idea of being in fact a kind of high-class prostitute to an only client though she somehow shows the manners in several episodes. Marriage to Rosedale, Dorset or Gryce would place her in that position, a respectable, socially sanctioned yet appalling way of living for a woman. Of course, prostitutes of any kind are not condemnable since they act out of dire economical necessity—if so, their clients are the disreputable ones. Wharton's point is that the society that forces girls like Lily to prostitute themselves inside or outside marriage is morally contemptible, but, at the same time, she exposes women like Lily who by looking down on Gerty and by looking up to the corrupt life of women like Bertha Dorset, do not help other women to believe in their chances of real independence or real love. Lily is prevented from playing safely the game of social survival taught by her mother ironically by the streak of sensitivity inherited from her father, a notorious victim of his wife—precisely the kind of mercenary woman Lily would like to be but never has the courage to become.

To Lily the idea of a man like Selden being tied down to a regular work routine seems faintly ludicrous, unintelligible. Lily even suggests to Selden that marrying for money would rid him of his bondage to work, though, ironically, when her turn comes to relieve herself of poverty by marrying Rosedale, she's overcome by disgust. In a sense, Selden's aloof attitude towards love is understandable. He is not a man to sentimentalize things over since his affair with Bertha Dorset. The ugliness of the connection between Bertha and Lawrence is lurking behind all the contacts between Lily and Selden; indeed, the hatred of the sexually active woman of loose reputation for the virginal, respectable girl, whom she knows to be on the hunt for a rich husband,

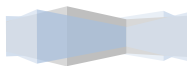
4 Rachel Blau DuPlessis. *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 17.

and, of course, jealousy, play an important part in Bertha's destruction of Lily's reputation. Besides, much of Selden's self-confidence seems to have been irreparably impaired by Bertha's sexual voracity. It is seemingly because of her meretricious behaviour that Selden learns to mistrust women, even sexually spotless women like Lily. Interestingly, a woman friend, not a male seducer or lover, becomes Lily Bart's nemesis; Bertha's female power of destruction is enormous and, of course, much more effective and subtle than, for instance, Trenor's typically male resource to violence to obtain physical satisfaction from Lily.

Speaking about Selden and Lily, Garry M. Leonard states that: "What deepens that relationship is that Lily is powerfully attracted to Selden's pose of being immune to her 'femininity' because she, for her part, is weary of the duplicitous pose of being feminine."⁵ In my view, Lily feels attracted to Selden because she is convinced that he has the clues to help her see herself as another woman, free of her incensing fixation with money and social position. She wants to shed her skin both for him and for herself to become somebody else, but she finds herself unable to reinvent a new Lily by Selden's side, because her fixation outweighs her emotional depth. That ultra-feminine public woman whom Leonard sees as a mask of femininity is the real and only Lily; her pathetic efforts to create a reborn Lily are thwarted by her extreme adherence to her public view of herself. Her suicide happens because she is hopelessly sick of the woman she is and knows she can't nurse the budding Lily she wants to offer Selden to expiate on her past materialism. The baby she dies embracing is no Freudian figure representing her latent maternal instinct but the weak, fragile Lily she can't give birth to nor can Selden father—the same ghostly baby is nursed by Jane Eyre in her sleep the evening before her wedding to Rochester, after she's been pondering on how difficult it is for her to believe in the birth of an unknown Jane Rochester.

Lily's attraction to Lawrence is the only streak of sensuality she really shows and, at that, it is certainly very limited. That it does exist is proven by the tableaux episode. The impersonal look she offers to her admirers takes a different inflection in Selden's case: "The look did indeed deepen as it rested on him, for even in that

5 Garry M. Leonard. "The Paradox of Desire: Jacques Lacan and Edith Wharton". *Edith Wharton Review.*, Volume III, no.2. (Long Island : Long Island University, Winter 1990). p. 13.



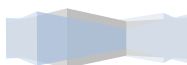
moment of self-intoxication Lily felt the quicker beat of life that his nearness always produced” (152). The supreme moment of selfishness is tinged by the uncontrollable element in her life: feeling for Selden, the only true emotion she ever feels. As it turns out, Selden even proposes marriage, conditioned to her abandonment of the obsession for money that is corrupting her. Selden’s position is identical to Wharton’s, when she explains in her autobiography how Lily Bart was first conceived:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the ‘old woe of the world’, any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.⁶

Wharton puts in Selden’s thoughts her own idea that Lily has been victimised by society but no less the idea that she is impossible to save for her ideals and herself are debased. Just as Selden hesitates between his vision of Lily offering herself to him as a friend and the Lily Bart who has obscure dealings with Trenor, Wharton wavers between downright rejection of Lily and her defense as yet another female victim to end up like her hero baffled by Lily’s corpse.

Curiously enough, Lawrence feels the same surge of indignation when the men of his social set saucily comment on Lily’s beauty as Newland Archer feels when outrageous gossip about Ellen Olenska reaches his ears. None of them seems to be in the right position to defend Ellen or Lily from alleged imputations of immorality and both react with prudence whenever they face some nasty piece of gossip concerning the women they love. The episode of the tableaux is a specially trying moment for Selden until he becomes intoxicated in his turn by Lily’s “self-intoxication” (137). The tableaux shows Lily’s fantasy of herself, the kind of self-perception that sustains the dreams of teenage film stars-to-be. Lily has the material of Hollywood stars—the narcissism and the exhibitionism—except for a high-class prudery of whose lack heroines like Carrie Meeber benefit. Lily casts off the heavy everyday clothes that stiffen and hide her perfect figure to don a much more revealing outfit that better displays her beautiful body. She auctions herself, but when the highest bidder turns

⁶ Edith Wharton. *A Backward Glance* (London: New Century, 1987), p. 207.



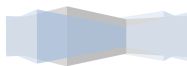
out to be Selden, she rejects him in a frigid, theatrical scene, which seems taken out of Lily's adolescent dreams of herself as a heroine in a sentimental novel. In many points, Lily is touchingly close—suicide included but social class excepted—to the twentieth-century most celebrated sexual myth: Marilyn Monroe, a woman who killed herself because she could not create a new woman out of the ruins of herself as the ultimate sex-symbol, and who always looked for the necessary strength to believe in herself in men.

The direct result of the tableaux is Lily's establishment as a sex symbol: Selden's tepid kiss, Rosedale's sensual passion for her and his marriage proposal and, indeed, Trenor's sexual arousal to the point of attempting rape come from this representation of Lily as the embodiment of sexual appeal. As the virgin she is, Lily doesn't realize she is playing a dangerous game as far as men are concerned; to Lily the tableaux performs the office of the cat-walk in a fashion show for top models: it attracts admiration but doesn't aim at the kind of lurid appeal of, for instance, pornographic shows. But if top models are now following lucrative careers, often ending in marriages to rich men, the times were not ripe for such use of beauty in Lily's time. The consequences of Lily's own-woman show are sadder:

Acting as her own artist, she complies with the sexual commands of her culture by sentimentalizing herself and by detaching herself from the reality of an immediate context. In this way, her creation of herself is simultaneously a symbolic act of self-extinction. The rest of the novel merely chronicles the outcome predicted by this moment in Lily's life.⁷

However, not all women are destroyed by acts of self-exploitation. It takes a controversial figure such as Carrie Meeber to turn the self-exploitation of a woman's body into benefit—economical in this case—for the woman herself. Carrie's degree of independence by the end of the book is high: she does get rid of the protection of men and of their control over her body at very little cost; since she had no moral scruples like Lily's to lose, she gains everything and loses nothing. Of course, her early career is less appealing, but the sad truth is that in terms of fictional realism, Carrie's solution to

7 Peter Conn. *The Divided Mind: Ideology and Imagination in America, 1898-1917* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1983), p. 186.



the problem of her survival seems more plausible than Lily's more artificial dramatization of her hopelessness.

Lily does not find herself split in two after the tableaux scene and Selden's renewal of his offer of love but after Trenor's sexual attack. The gap between Lily the virginal, marriageable lady and Lily the sexual object, who is asked to pay for men's favours with her body, is too damaging for her self-image, this is why she tries to turn to Selden for help to piece herself together. Lily's moment of truth, the moment when she first sees herself for what she is, occurs in her appeal to Gerty—and it is significant that she appeals to Gerty and not directly to Selden, for the act implies that she will never acknowledge to him that he was right in his view of her as a materialistic woman:

“Gerty, you know him—you understand him—tell me; if I went to him, if I told him everything—if I said: ‘I am bad through and through—I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money—’ yes, money! That’s my shame, Gerty—and it’s known, it’s said of me—it’s what men think of me—if I said it all to him—told him the whole story—said plainly: ‘I’ve sunk lower than the lowest, for I’ve taken what they take, and not paid as they pay’—oh, Gerty, you know him, you can speak for him: if I told him everything, would he loathe me? Or would he pity me, and understand me, and save from loathing myself?” (166)

Lawrence on his side, is prompted by the tableaux to dream of himself as the hero rescuing her from her materialistic atmosphere. In his romanticizing of himself, Lawrence comes to believe that Gryce was rejected by Lily because of him, when, in fact, the proposal never took place. Curiously enough, Lily's real match in calculating spirit and social ambition is Simon Rosedale, but in his case Wharton shows an exasperating anti-semitism. Rosedale's disagreeableness is emphasized again and again in racial terms—the term racist would be more accurate—when, in fact, he is the only man who really understands Lily's position as he uses her own social code. The mixture of attraction and repulsion Lily feels for the Jewish Rosedale is closely bound with her wavering self-image: when salvation through marriage to Rosedale comes, what she finds unbearable is not the man but herself as the woman she had always wanted to be: the luxury toy-wife of a very rich man. Lawrence Selden indeed hits the nail on the head by noticing in the disastrous dinner at Bècassin's that Lily is “matchless” (216): by paying tribute to her uniqueness and beauty, Selden unconsciously discloses

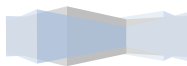


the truth, namely, that there is no man to marry her. Selden seems ready to help her out after Bertha's rebuke but, again, she rejects him—nor will she explain neither defend herself—and the moment of mutual trust, of Selden's faith on her is over, a fact that she realizes only too late. In the narrator's voice: "Well—Selden had twice been ready to stake his faith on Lily Bart; but the third trial has been too severe for his endurance." (320)

Lily Bart knows it is her fault that the only real love for her ever felt by a man doesn't exist any longer. By burning Bertha's letters she performs her last act of love for Selden, in the belief that she is past redemption to Selden's eyes. Founding her marriage to Rosedale on Selden and Bertha's affair would have been indeed an ugly manoeuvre. She needs Selden's support in the background to sustain her faith in herself—and when this fails she's lost. On his side, he acknowledges his cowardice in front of Lily's dead body just as she acknowledged hers by burning the letters in his fireplace. Theirs is a sad case of misunderstanding, a renewed contest between pride (Lily's refusal to compromise) and prejudice (Lawrence's refusal to try a new sentimental experiment in his life) in which both lose. What they lack is the imagination to believe in themselves as lovers, to transcend their boundaries as social beings to be simply human beings, a step made too difficult for them by their own cowardice.

Edith Wharton once speaks of "vivid if socially obscure ladies" (17) dining out with Rosedale and Jack Stepney. One of those un-ladylike ladies could well be Carrie, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's description of Carrie shows the kind of new heroine of dark origins—the self-made woman—that appeared in American fiction as the embodiment of the questionable reality of the American dream:

Caroline or 'Sister Carrie' as she had been half affectionately termed by the family, was possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis. Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was nevertheless her guiding characteristic. Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure which tended toward eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a



fair example of the middle American class—two generations removed from the immigrant.⁸

Carrie could have easily been a main figure in the Gormers' set or lead the enigmatic life of a Mrs Hatch at the Emporium hotel, mercilessly using Lily to get a hold onto 'good society'. Their widely different social origins place Carrie and Lily in extreme ends of the social spectre, but interestingly, the initial disadvantage turns out to be Carrie's main asset, for she drifts aimlessly out of her low class origin without any moral quivering. Morpeth, the painter who organizes the tableaux, fascinated by Lily's potential as a model tries faintly to attract her to the bohemian world in which successful actresses like Carrie lead glittering lives, but Lily leaves the petition unanswered, probably because she doesn't want to delegate on others the public display of her beauty or because she has already realized that the tableaux scene belongs to the same class of indecorous exhibitionism as the music hall acting that made the likes of Carrie successful. Nonetheless, Lily has many points in common with another character in *Sister Carrie*: Hurtswood. Lily's downfall and her death strongly recall his ordeal as an unemployed, increasingly impoverished man. Both die for the same reason: they can't bear the thought of a long, lonely, poor old age, not to speak of their horror for dinginess and their nostalgia for a past of soft luxury, enhanced in Lily's case by the memory of her mother's death.

In *The House of Mirth* the only real alternative to Lily's grudging dependence seems to be the independent life of Gerty Farish. Lily looks down on Gerty's independence because it is based on limited financial resources and she aspires to commanding endless resources. Unlike Selden, Lily takes towards Gerty the attitude of the patronizing beauty who believes that plainer girls than herself are condemned to utter obscurity and ever-lasting spinsterhood. Yet, in many senses, Gerty is freer than Lily despite her modest income and even has a much greater emotional capacity. She's a good, kind-hearted, generous woman who is actively engaged in charity towards girls needier than her. Indeed, she is enormously charitable to Lily, going to the extent of forsaking her claim on Selden—under the impression that Lily's beauty entitles her to having any man she chooses—which actually places Gerty in the position of true

8 Theodore Dreiser. *Sister Carrie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 4.

heroine of the novel. Interestingly, Selden and Gerty agree that the Lily on display at the tableaux is the real Lily, and, if anybody ever sees the spectacle of the real Lily, maddened by her discovery of her hidden self, that is Gerty. Even so, Gerty is under the wrong impression to the last that Lily will change and stop acting exclusively out of self-interest.

One of the most puzzling matters of *The House of Mirth* is the different standard of morality that plainer women are subjected to. There seems to be nothing wrong in Lawrence dining with Gerty alone, while Lily's visit to his flat triggers for her endless embarrassment. As for the true comradeship between women this seems to be a myth, for Lily won't tell Gerty the truth—won't bind herself to Gerty through the truth—even though Gerty does effectively help her in the terrible evening of Trenor's attack and later in her downfall. Other women are ready to help Lily to trap a good husband (Mrs Fisher's role is certainly fundamental in Lily's story) but there seems to be no real friendship among women, nor among men and women, which makes Lily's appeal to Selden for friendship even stranger.

III

The belief that heroines must be beauties and that plain-looking female characters cannot be interesting heroines is a typical deformation easily found in women writers working under conditions dictated by men. Deprived of her beauty, Lily bears no comparison to Gerty as a human being. In *The Age of Innocence* the beauty of Ellen Olenska is apparently lost with her marriage, but Wharton's intelligent step is to make Ellen's inner beauty diaphanous to Newland Archer. Selden is both dazzled by Lily's beauty and blind to Gerty's deeper charms, while Newland understands that for all her Diana-like beauty, May Welland's inner self is not as beautiful as Ellen Olenska's.

Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska have approximately the same age when Wharton makes them appear as the centre of one of her novels. Interestingly, Ellen lives in the 1870s her love adventure, so she's bordering on sixty when the book closes thirty years later—precisely when Lily's life enters the turmoil of her last months on earth. Thus, Lily Bart turns out to be the contemporary of Newland's children and, most

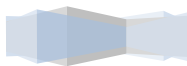


interestingly, of Fanny Beaufort, the illegitimate child who becomes Newland's daughter-in-law. Fanny appears in *The Age of Innocence* to stress the wide gap between the morality of successive generations, though, to a certain extent, she seems much more liberated than Lily Bart.

Lily's and Ellen's backgrounds are in sharp contrast in aspects ranging from the everyday to their innermost feelings. So, for instance, while Ellen is for a while mistress of her own house in an unfashionable, bohemian quarter of her choice, Lily never has a place of her own. She is for most of the book alternatively sickened by the ugliness of her room at her aunt's and by the cost exacted by the enjoyment of the luxurious houses of her friends. Money is a problematic subject in the lives of Wharton's heroines, as it is bound to be in the lives of all dependent women. Both Ellen and Lily depend on the kindness of their families for their support. Ellen lost her money to the rapacity of her husband and the discriminating legal system of Europe and is forced to live fundamentally on her grandmother's allowance while Lily is reluctantly supported by her aunt. The Manson-Mingotts threaten Ellen with cutting her allowance so as to blackmail her into going back to her husband, a fate from which her sympathetic grandmother rescues her. Wharton seems to have devised a compensatory money system by which her heroines survive or are annihilated: Ellen, who doesn't squander her money nor crave for riches, is made financially independent; Lily, who cannot control her expenses, loses her aunt's inheritance and with it the only real chance to avoid having to work for a living, which is what actually makes her life unbearable.

Clothes are to Ellen Olenska an extension of her personality; her dresses are attractive, original and daring like herself. Lily uses dress to frame and arrange for better effect her beauty. Clothes remain an external artefact, unrelated to her own self, for Lily; she sees them as another sign in the social code of the rich and also as her costly admission card to expensive dinners:

"If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we don't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership." (112)



Lily Bart is less Europeanised than Ellen, for Ellen's father was European and she was married to another European man. Lily's experience of Europe was limited to life in poverty with her mother and occasional holidays with her aunt, while Ellen had the chance to enjoy the culturally rich background of her husband's European home. In any case, the aura of foreignness enveloping Ellen and Lily makes them somehow alien to their fellow countrymen. Ellen's parents are certainly enigmatic and so is their role in her life. She is Europeanised by what Wharton calls a roaming childhood—similar to Wharton's own—apparently happy, though soon ended in orphanhood and the odd guardianship of her aunt Medora. Wharton, who gives the utmost importance to the kind of education her heroines receive, emphasizes the eclecticism of Ellen's education, which obviously has taught her how to be free of conventions. Lily's education is essential in the development of her story. She was educated by her mother to exploit her own beauty and to manipulate men, beginning with her father, though there is no other hint at a regular education or intellectual training. Lily was made a fastidious and demanding woman whose aesthetic sensibility was exclusively fostered by the idea of her own beauty. The absence of a mother in Ellen's life and the overwhelming pressure of Lily's mother on her explain the profound differences between them: Ellen is an exception outside the realm of social values transmitted through matriarchal lines while Lily is the archetypical product of the marriage-centred education of pre-feminist times.

Obviously, the main difference between Ellen and Lily is their marital status: Ellen is separated and out of the marriage market, while Lily is in it but can't advantageously market herself. Both are talked about by men in relation to other men but are apparently innocent of all sins except not thinking enough of their reputations: Ellen out of social naïvety and Lily out of dire need to go on with her luxury life. In Lily's case the guardianship of the family is ineffectual, possibly because the links between her and her closest relatives are too loose; there is, at all events, an absolute correspondence between family and society as far as her downfall is concerned while in *The Age of Innocence* a stubborn family loyalty imposes itself partially on society's demands. The family tries to dictate to Ellen the terms on which she is to be readmitted into New York society, since society as a whole is imposing them on the



family, but it fails. The fact remains that Ellen does obtain support from her relatives to a certain extent, but help confined to social matters and not to her personal happiness. Interestingly, neither Ellen nor Lily ever form families of their own, so that they can't transmit their personal experience to a new generation. They do not have any maternal instincts, nor any idea of marriage beyond the relationship between the members of the couple and its position in society. Children are hardly mentioned in either novel and when the subject of pregnancy is raised in *The Age of Innocence* as May claims to be pregnant it is indeed surrounded by a deep moral horror.

The question of beauty is always taken for granted in fiction as far as women are concerned, without much deep reflection. Wharton advances a step by writing about Ellen's at a moment when her beauty is no longer her main attraction. Her beauty is fading yet she's carefree. Ellen cries often and is not afraid of showing her real emotions—Lily doesn't cry for fear of spoiling her smooth face. Newland falls in love awed by the suffering that has gone into the making of Ellen's mature eyes; Selden is flabbergasted by the amount of uglier, inferior life sacrificed to produce Lily—whom he suspects to be extraordinarily well finished outwardly at the cost of her inner making. Ellen understands beauty at another level than the purely materialistic; she does possess a sense of beauty—as it can be seen in the decoration of her house—and enjoys artistic pleasure, unlike Lily who is grossly materialistic. Lily is most deeply ridiculed by Wharton in the episode in which Ned Silverton tells Selden how sickened he is by Lily's failure to appreciate poetry or the beauty of the Mediterranean just immediately after Lily has been reflecting on the soundness of her aesthetic sensitivity as proven by her enjoyment of the Mediterranean cruise with the Dorsets.

Unlike Lily Ellen is capable of strong, authentic feelings ranging from her love for Newland to her determination not to resume her married life. Lily can't love nor feel any deep emotional tie because she has no emotional referent to guide her. Both Ellen and Lily are rootless, lonely women who find it very difficult to find a place within American society; in fact, Lily blames her inability to form any deep attachment on this rootlessness. Nonetheless, Lily understands much better than Ellen the place she occupies in society and the way society functions. Ellen, who is not self-conscious as Lily is, misreads the attitude of New York society towards her as sympathy and

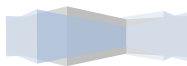


blunders ceaselessly. She is unconventional and does not respect social distinctions due to her ignorance of them and to her inner conviction that at the bottom the individual is much more important than the group. Lily's tragedy is that, in spite of knowing how society works, she commits unforgivable social errors and shuts herself out of her elitist social group. Lily is contradictory in that she is too self-conscious in social terms to be self-controlled, while Ellen's self-control springs out of her unself-consciousness as far as social matters are concerned.

The struggle for power determines social and personal relationships in both novels. Ellen is forced to become an active person by her family's pressure to transform her into a passive, acquiescent person; hers is the silent rebellion of the child who quietly resists his parent's arbitrary censure to finally surprise them with a rebellious outburst. On the contrary, Lily feels that she can't counteract the forces that are silencing her, making her passive in spite of herself. Ellen's move to Europe is a movement of self-assertion to recover the lost power on her life—Lily's drift into death is her ultimate surrender to passivity. Obviously, Ellen is made unhappy by having to give up Newland but what matters to Wharton is that she doesn't actually surrender, for she leads a free life in Paris and never returns to her husband. Unlike Lily, Ellen denies the idea that a woman must pay for her actions and even less by acts committed by others against them, such as her husband ill-treatment of herself, or Bertha Dorset's destruction of Lily. Ellen wants to establish an elemental trust between her and the people around her since she is not afraid of speaking out, but curiously nobody, not even Newland, wants to know the truth about her marriage. That seems to her the sorest point as she remarks to Newland: "Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!"⁹

In Ellen's view, morality has nothing to do with reputation but with the power to damage the happiness of others. She leaves Newland because she can't bear the responsibility of destroying May's life, even at the cost of making him unhappy, since she feels she's tied to May by bonds of gratitude that cannot be repaid by an

9 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 68.



elopement with Newland. In any case, Ellen's altruism has a limit: it seems clear that she doesn't return to Olenski because she won't sacrifice herself to a person bent on hurting her and damaging her own happiness, a matter to which, for her, standard, social ideas of morality simply do not apply. This is why Ellen is both a victim of society and a rebel against it.

Both Ellen and Lily seek the friendship of men rather than women for moral guidance and trust men they don't really know very well but with whom some enigmatic bond of communication is easily established. Both Newland and Lawrence turn out to be unaffordable luxuries as lovers and so Ellen and Lily are left in an emotional, moral situation even more complex than the one previous to the emergence of love. Lawrence and Newland are deeply attracted by the element of unpredictability in their beloved's behaviour, though the ratio of conventionality in the relationship is inverse: Newland is a conventional man fascinated by an unconventional woman, while Lily a deeply conventional woman attracted by Selden's unconventional aloofness.

To a certain extent, May Welland is a successful version of Lily Bart: she's the kind of girl Lily would have become had she nested in the atmosphere of family life and easy money. Lily is closer to May than to Ellen since both Lily and May have been brought up to expect homage from life. Edith Wharton tantalizes the reader with repeated allusions to May and Lily's beauty, a move that seems intended to reinforce the strength of her own disqualification of both characters. The harsh, merciless terms in which Wharton describes May Welland through Newland's reflections could as well be applied to describe Lily Bart:

That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland's familiar features; and once more it was borne in on him that marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas. (39)

The fear Newland faces in this passage is arguably the same feeling that prevents Selden from marrying Lily. Lily and May belong to the same breed of beautiful, intellectually void women learned in social and domestic manners, though Lily seems more inclined to lead the life of a fashionable hostess and May to become one of New



York upper-class matrons. The most interesting difference between them is that, for all her beauty, May is not appealing to men in sexual terms, while Lily is, though she cannot control that appeal for she has never experienced herself any kind of sexual attraction. Ellen is the one who is sexually appealing and in control of the attraction she exerts on men.

May is a key figure in *The Age of Innocence* and in Wharton's view of women as preservers of the social system stigmatizing other women who challenge its conventions. Through marriage, May takes a seat in the circle of respectable women who bear on their shoulders the weight of social continuity and the transmission of social values through generations in New York, but as Judith Fryer remarks, "The repetitive rituals of *The Age of Innocence* are the signs of a female society but a female society in decline, with frozen rituals."¹⁰. May perfectly knows the mechanism of New York society which enables to rally help from her friends to retrieve Newland back from Ellen's arms. May and the women in her family test Newland's capacity for sacrifice and for obedience to social ethics by entrusting Ellen's welfare to him, even though the family knows his views on the subject of Ellen's divorce are potentially subversive and radically differ from theirs. May's shadow seems to be hovering in each scene between Ellen and Newland; May indeed shows a remarkable talent to impinge on them in their tenderest moments. She resists Newland's urge to get married—his sexual desire for her—in the name of a puritanical restraint that has traditionally worked to submit the husband's allegedly unrestrained sexuality to the wife's supposed sense of sexual decorum: at least traditional wives lived in the belief that by dosifying sex they could better control their men. The unpredictable occurs when the force of Ellen's sexual attraction intrudes in May's life, for then May is forced to use sex as her ultimate weapon against Ellen through Newland's marital sexual relationship to her. Since May cannot compete with Ellen in terms of sexual attraction she resources to a by-product of the sexual relationship, conception, thus fixing her role as a respectable wife and mother and neutralizing the sexual threat of Ellen, the adulterous, childless woman, who was endangering the continuity of the Wellands

10 Judith Fryer, "Purity and Power in *The Age of Innocence*", in Bloom, p. 106.

social life. May is made to suffer by Ellen, for she does suffer with the idea of losing Newland, whom May believes to belongs to her own set. The appalling matter is that May outwits both Ellen and Newland by using the most primitive and distinctively feminine tool: her womb and her sexual privileges as a wife.

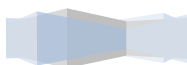
IV

Ellen has close affinities with another fictional character, Henry James' Isabel Archer. Isabel's story, *Portrait of a Lady*, published in 1881, takes place in the 1870s, which makes Isabel Ellen's fictional contemporary. Isabel faces like Ellen the problem of going back to an abominable husband but Isabel's final resolution is totally different from Ellen's. Isabel will not acknowledge the failure of her marriage to Osmond because as she remarks: "I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I'd much rather die"¹¹. Apart from the idea that one must stick to one's promises, including marriage, Isabel seems to return to Osmond out of love for Pansy, not to sacrifice the girl's happiness. Likewise, Ellen would rather sacrifice her personal happiness than destroy the lives of people like May, though in spirit, Ellen Olenska is closer to Caspar Goodwood, who sees that "You must save what you can of your life; you musn't loose it all simply because you've lost a part" (634) than to Isabel's martyred renunciation.

Isabel Archer combines Ellen's intelligence with Lily Bart's initial self-confidence. Like Lily's as seen by Lawrence Selden, "Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own" (116), though the truth is that in neither case is that intention revealed and even less accomplished. On the other hand, Isabel's life plan seems to have been devised by Ellen Olenska herself:

"I'm not in my first youth—I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know

11 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 536.



something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with property to tell me.” (214)

The difference is that Ellen sticks to her resolution to keep herself free while Isabel's only determined action—going back to Gilbert Osmond—leaves her stranded in an eternity of suffering. Ellen has already suffered in marriage and is determined not to suffer again, neither by going back to her husband nor by taking upon her shoulders the responsibility for destroying her family's position by accepting conventional Newland as her second husband. Ellen seems to be Wharton's answer to Isabel's surrender to conventionality in spite of all her expectations and all her money. In addition, the coincidence of Newland's surname with Isabel's seems to point out a connection between them based on their deep conventionality.

When Ellen first appears at the Mingotts' opera box the effect she causes on male opera-goers is similar to that of Lily at the tableaux: the men gossip about her and only Newland Archer remains detached, watching. Ellen is certainly on display at the opera dressed in her original gown, but she's not aiming at anybody's attention, nor looking for admiration. At first, Newland's only concern for Ellen is related to how Ellen's reputation will impinge on his marriage to May Welland. He is puzzled by Ellen's insouciance as far as social costumes are concerned; her first daring move—asking Newland to visit her after he has just announced her engagement to May—shows how different she is from Lily, who lets herself into a very embarrassing position by accepting Selden's invitation to his flat. Newland, torn between obedience to conventions and her unusual behaviour, feels a new sort of perplexity that forces him to reconsider his point of view about women. To his changing mind, one thing is a social rule and another very different is the flesh and blood on which the punishment sanctioned by the rule is imposed:

“(…) Why shouldn't she be conspicuous if she chooses? Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? She's 'poor Ellen' certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit.” (37)

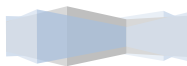
Through this reasoning Newland discovers he actually holds a point of view that is neither masculine nor feminine; his newly discovered androgynous point of view is challenged by the values of established patriarchy represented by May Welland as



well as by male-chauvinist men like Beaufort. When Newland musters “Women ought to be free—as free as we are” (39) he’s shocked by the discovery that this idea places him outside the conventions which he actually obeys. Ellen Olenska personifies his newly found thought; by falling in love with her Newland is daring himself to obey his own convictions and to break free from the matriarchal environment that has already swallowed him whole. Newland sets off to rescue himself rather than Ellen, but since he doesn’t possess the cool detachment of Lawrence Selden, he fails himself and Ellen. Archer’s idea of marriage—based on intellectual companionship and a rich sensual bond—cannot be carried out successfully with May. Mrs Mingott agrees with this view and this is why she daringly pities Newland and Ellen for not having fallen in love at the right time. Newland’s position and his forced choice between the conventional May and the unconventional Ellen, strongly recalls the ordeal of another self-tortured hero, Charles, the pseudo-Victorian hero torn between his conventional Ernestina and his audacious Sarah of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).

If Lawrence Selden finds Lily Bart reluctant to accept his sensible advice in spite of her having asked him for his friendship and guidance, Newland finds it extremely simple to convince Ellen not to seek a divorce from her husband. Actually she submits to his view out of love for him, for she knows that a divorce in the family would affect the public view of his marriage to May and because she badly needs his guidance in social matters of which she is utterly ignorant. However, just like Selden suspects Lily of liaisons she never entered in, Newland finds Ellen’s position suspect; he is not certain that she is innocent of the alleged elopement with her husband’s secretary, Mr Riviere. Interestingly, Newland seems sobered up in his rash judgement of Ellen precisely by Mr Riviere himself, who appeals to him to do for Ellen what he can’t manage: liberate her from the burden of her marriage, a petition which creates the oddest comradeship between two men sentimentally related to the same woman.

The only peculiar episode between Newland and Ellen is Ellen’s use of Newland to avoid Beaufort’s persecution, something that disappoints him but, in any case, to a lesser extent than Selden is disappointed by seeing Lily leave Trenor’s home at midnight. Newland runs away from Ellen after the Beaufort episode to May’s arms only to end up realising that everybody is assuming Ellen’s future is their territory,



even against Ellen's wishes, and disregarding her personal happiness. Newland is being bombarded with the idea of the rich background of Ellen's marriage on all sides and surprised by the lack of loyalty towards Ellen as an individual. His mounting anger is topped by Aunt Medora's suggestion that Ellen should go back to Olenski since he believes Medora should understand better than anybody her niece's position: the idea that only he is sufficiently loyal to Ellen's happiness actually plunges Newland into love and into his mission as Ellen's deliverer.

In a sense, Ellen and Newland seem to enjoy the idea of fancying themselves heroes in a sentimental novel. Their case is so hopeless that it seems it can only give them full enjoyment by giving it a literary, dramatic tension to beautify the actual ugliness of things. This is why Ellen pretends she doesn't see Newland at Lime Rock the first time he seeks her after his wedding. The allusion to *The Shaughraun*, a play in which two lovers find themselves in a similar situation is not lost on Newland. Newland's yellow roses, Ellen's crimson robe, the necklace with amber beads which "were trying to her complexion" (278) worn by Ellen in the evening of her farewell dinner, seem to be beautiful props that decorate the (melo)drama they are enacting in the midst of the puritanical squalor of New York's upper class. Even the clandestine solution they choose to carry on loving each other seems amazingly mystifying—a secret to enliven the dullest of lives:

It was clear to him, and it grew more clear under closer scrutiny, that if she should finally decide on returning to Europe—returning to her husband—it would be not because her old life tempted her, even on the new terms offered. No: she would go on only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to Archer, a temptation to fall away from the standard they had both set up. Her choice would be to stay near him as long as he did not ask her to come nearer; and it depended on himself to keep her just there, safe but secluded. (206)

This unrealistic, though morally demanding plan to love, is shattered by the restoration of the rule of sanctioned patriarchy. The power of patriarchy is, however, so diminished, that May must lie to keep Newland with her and must pin him down to their marriage by conceiving a child from him in the middle of his agony for having lost Ellen. May's action hurts Ellen but it is Newland and not Ellen who is destroyed by May. Judy Fryer intelligently remarks that: "If he has missed something, Ellen Olenska, apparently, has not: at least her life on the same street in Paris as Edith Wharton's



suggests that she has created her own sources of tradition and continuity, of richness and power”¹². Arguably, May Welland has had time to discover before her early death that securing a husband doesn’t mean securing his love, and that has been her punishment for her lie. Undoubtedly, there has been a certain harmony and contented happiness in May and Newland’s marriage, but not passionate love, which is the “something” Newland has missed. There is no definite clue about whether Newland and Ellen’s marriage would have been happy; Newland himself seems to entertain no illusions about his capacity to fulfil Ellen Olenska’s emotional needs, this is why he doesn’t even try to visit her and even less to marry her at the proper time, when both of them have been widowed for years:

During that time he had been living with his youthful memory of her; but she had doubtless had other and more tangible companionship. Perhaps she too had kept her memory of him as something apart; but if she had, it must have been like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was no time to pray every day... (299)

V

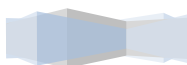
The fate of fiction heroines was restricted to a few standard situations in turn-of-the-century American literature, typically including little else than marriage and death. Peter Conn finds the same problem in Edith Wharton’s fiction, a view that summarizes very well her position as a woman writer:

A profoundly divided woman, Edith Wharton exhibits in her novels and tales a discriminating sympathy for her victimized female characters, a sympathy anchored by her understanding of their fates as women. Yet she is unable to delineate or even to imagine careers for her heroines that do not end in disappointment, or despair, or death.¹³

According to Conn, then, Lily Bart would be the classical example of a Wharton heroine whose marriage-centred career ends in death and Ellen Olenska the epitome of Wharton’s disappointed heroines. In Lily’s case the alternatives offered by the narrative are few: if single, Lily may go on living a dingy, working life—or choose an alternative life similar to Gerty Farish’s—or die; if she chooses marriage, Lily may marry

12 Fryer, in Bloom, p.115.

13 Conn, p. 173.



either Rosedale or Dorset for money, or marry Selden for love. Obviously, living like Gerty Farish would make Lily behave in an out-of-character way; presumably a happy ending would be a forced, badly managed ending in the worst of sentimental fiction's tradition, and a marriage of convenience would enthrone Lily as the amoral heroine she can't be according to literary conventions applying to women writers. To sum up, Lily seems to have been dying since the very beginning of the book and no other exit seems available. Death is an easy enough resource to end a story—after all, all stories do end in the death of the protagonists inside or outside the book—but women writers learned to manipulate death in their favour and that of the general heroine Rachel Blau DuPlessis speaks about:

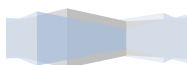
Yet her punishment is often treated as her triumph. Death itself becomes a symbolic protest against the production of a respectable female and the connivances of a respectable community. So in texts ending with death, there is often a moment of protest—social energy or a desiring life—just as in the marriage ending, the protest is autonomy or vocation.¹⁴

Lily's death is not this case. There is nothing new in terms of narrative strategies in *The House of Mirth* although Wharton's book is innovative in its treatment of the psychological uncertainty of both hero and heroine and in giving no absolute moral referent that applies to all the characters in the book. Wharton seems often overburdened with the strain of keeping Lily Bart above the surface and herself in sympathy with her heroine. Her impatience with the characters she was forced to depict against her convictions of what real men and women felt, seems to me to apply to Lily Bart—and equally to Gerty Farish:

The poor novelists who were my contemporaries (in English-speaking countries) had to fight hard for the right to turn the wooden dolls about which they were expected to make believe into struggling suffering human beings; but we have been avenged, and more than avenged, not only by life but by the novelists, and I hope the latter will see before long that it is as hard to get dramatic interest out of a mob of irresponsible criminals as out of the Puritan marionettes who formed our stock-in-trade. Authentic human life lies somewhere between the two, and is always there for the great novelist to rediscover.¹⁵

14 Blau, p. 16.

15 Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 127.



The Age Of Innocence actually contains in its pages the seed for another illuminating book: the book of Ellen Olenska's life in Paris. By 1920, it was fully acceptable to write about a heroine like Ellen, despite the scant probabilities of a real woman behaving like her in the 1870s, yet Wharton still left Ellen's life as a separated woman in Paris in the dark, possibly because she was more interested in the power of destruction that apparently fragile women like May Welland carry with them. When Wharton wrote the book about Ellen Olenska's life in Paris, she left romance aside and put friendship with men and women in the centre of life. She called the book *A Backward Glance* and it turned out to be her own autobiography. No Newland Archer can be found there.

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